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## PROTECTING THE THEME-READER

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Among the "Contributors' Club" articles of the *Atlantic Monthly* for May, 1917, appeared a sparkling little essay attractively entitled "The Gentle Theme-Reader." To laymen the humorously exaggerated picture of the mechanical corrector of Freshman compositions probably seems only "funny," but to the members of the brotherhood of theme-readers the characterization is perhaps too nearly real to be entirely amusing. The *Atlantic* "Clubber" has little hope to hold out for the chronic theme-reader, and his advice is hardly encouraging. Break away from the dull task, he urges, before your hair becomes too thin and your spectacles too thick, and do not cast away your young years on the rubbish heaps of mediocrity.

This advice is not very new, for all instructors of Freshmen in English have heard it repeatedly; but in spite of the warning young men continue to apply for positions which they know consist entirely or almost entirely of routine work in correcting Freshman themes, and they hold these positions for years because, in the larger universities at least, the demand for instruction in the required Freshman English is out of all proportion to the demand for instruction in English literature, and most of the literature courses are given, naturally enough, by older teachers who have "grown up with the department." But Freshman-English instruction must be given, and trained men must be engaged to give it; and so every spring the departments are recruited up to full strength. In go the orders to Cambridge and other central dispatching stations, and forth go the young Galahads, fresh from their graduate courses in Anglo-Saxon poetry, Chaucer, and the Elizabethan drama, to their assignments of three sections of Freshman English—and nothing more. They do not want to

teach nothing but Freshman English; they merely recognize the fact that if they elect to begin their careers in a large university there is nothing else for them to do. Few of them realize the pressure brought upon the administration of a big English department by instructors who burn to teach more literature and less composition. The average Freshman-English instructor has to take his place in the long queue of teachers who are living under the bondage of Freshman English, and who are conducting a phantom fight to get out of as much of it as possible. If he is easily discouraged he will follow the *Atlantic Clubber's* advice and get into another occupation; if he is a very brilliant scholar or an unusually shrewd academic politician he will work or juggle his way into one of the few openings ahead; if he is of the faithful, hard-working, non-brilliant majority he will probably find himself at the end of four or five years with his Freshman-English work relieved, at most, only by a course in "advanced" composition or by an assistantship in some long-established course in literature. And in the meantime he will have been subjected to the warpage of his intellectual self which comes from continued absorption in a difficult program of work that is essentially elementary and monotonous. There is a real danger that long before he wins an opportunity to do much teaching of literature he will have become a dull, mechanical reader of themes, his higher inspirations and visions ground away in the drudgery of correcting daily an unshrinking pile of exercises in composition. In this period of his faithful servitude he needs and deserves all the encouragement and protection which his department can give him, and which he can give himself. Protecting the theme-reader, moreover, means ultimately protecting the students, just as much as the surgeon's gown and the nurse's regular recess periods mean ultimate protection for the patient. The suggestions which follow, therefore, need no excuse for existing.

One of the first victories which the young instructor of Freshman English has to gain is that over his impression that his task is an inferior one. He finds a few of the older members of his department dividing up among themselves the special courses in literature, but the majority grinding away in the treadmill of the fifty or

sixty sections of the introductory course. Although he may understand the reasons for this division of labor, he naturally wants his share of the good things of his profession. He hears his chairman refer to the assistantships in the general-literature courses as "plums," and he naturally argues that, conversely, the Freshman English sections are not plums. There is a tradition that the best teachers are selected from the ranks of the Freshman-English instructors for these "advanced" positions, and he soon comes to regard the fact that he is teaching only three sections of Freshman English as little short of disgraceful. He is only a scrub, and he longs for a place on the varsity team. And unless he is unusual he will be sorely tempted to mark time in his distasteful berth until relief comes.

The effect of all this undercurrent of feeling upon the Freshmen needs only to be pointed out. The majority of the students are not bubbling with enthusiasm over the subject of English, and where the teacher's enthusiasm is itself negative little good can be accomplished. The remedy lies partly with the departmental administration and partly with the instructors themselves. The department should make as equitable a distribution of the work in Freshman English as possible. No instructor should have three sections of Freshman English and nothing more, while others in the department have no composition work at all. As far as possible the older and more experienced members of the department should have each a section of beginning work, even if they carry it as an extra subject, in order that the course may have the dignity which really belongs to it, and that the younger men may not feel that an unjust share of the campaigning is being thrust upon them. And the assistantships in literature should be distributed as far as they will reach, even if more sections have to be created by reducing the number of students in each. The result will be better teaching in Freshman English.

This democratizing of the English department may not, however, entirely convince the Freshman-English instructor that his work is worthy of his best efforts. He may still feel that drilling semi-illiterates in the rudiments of English is not the career to which he looked forward. He may need to take himself severely in hand,

to bring himself to the realization that the drill work which he is doing, dull and mediocre though it may seem, is really a vital part of democratic education. His fate is no different from that of other teachers with aspirations for careers in art and letters. If he suffers at beholding the language of Milton and Macaulay mangled in Freshman themes, he should remember that his colleagues in the modern-language departments daily hear the language which they love crucified on the stuttering tongues of unwilling young Americans. If he cannot acquire any enthusiasm for his work, he should at least learn to recognize its dignity and school himself to doing it conscientiously and energetically. If he cannot do this but continues to feel that his Pegasus has become but a jaded nag and his pearls are being trampled by the swine, he had better resign his position at once and cease defrauding himself, his students, and his university with the empty motions of teaching.

A charge frequently made by instructors against Freshman English is that it gives them no opportunity to display their powers of organization or initiative or their ability to attract students. In big departments the course in Freshman English is standardized, and each instructor is pledged to follow a printed program which has been constructed by the director of the course or by a committee of instructors. Where, as is frequently the case, the chairman of the course is an older man with a strong personality and complete confidence in his own views, he may, often without being aware of it, impose upon his subordinates an individual system which proves exceedingly irksome and galling to them. Under these conditions it is perfectly possible for their teaching to become inanimate and perfunctory, simply because they are vainly trying to square their individualities with that of another man. Instructors in Freshman English often feel, furthermore, that they are not in any position to demonstrate that their teaching attracts students. At the beginning of the year a block of students is assigned to them; they have to teach in each section no fewer and no more than have all the other teachers of Freshman English. They may accordingly find themselves teaching a program which they did not construct, with the assistance of a textbook which they did not select, to students who did not select them.

All this looks like a heavy indictment. Actually it is not as serious as it seems, if the instructor will but view it calmly. It is true that his students did not select him, but this fact does not prevent him from establishing with them such pleasant relations that they one and all fight extradition from his section and remain his very good friends throughout the four years of their college life. If his students have not elected his course because they value it, he has the compensating knowledge that they have not elected it because they believe it to be a "cinch." He is not, moreover, subjected to the temptation of popularizing his course in order to secure a showy enrolment. It is true that he has not in Freshman English the same independence that he would have in a course of his own choosing, but it is seldom that he has not the opportunity of assisting in the construction of the program, either as a member of the committee or as a volunteer adviser. And if he is of the right stuff he will find a hundred ways in which, without departing from the general program, he can develop his own methods of teaching. The program dictates what shall be taught; if he feels certain that he can do best with his own method of arriving at the ends sought, he may refuse to accept any cut-and-dried methods proposed. And if he is alert and active and eager to put his own ideas into practice, he is likely to attract more notice in the big group of which he is a member than if he were conducting an isolated course in which no other teachers were personally interested.

The most serious of all charges against Freshman English spring not, however, from these administrative and pedagogical aspects but from the nature of the work itself. It is against the dulling effects of prolonged theme-reading that the *Atlantic* Clubber has directed most of his satirical shafts. Freshman-English instructors often feel the monotony of their work; they are not quite so likely to be aware of the intellectual myopia which tends slowly to overtake the chronic theme-reader.

There are few academic programs as monotonous as that of the teacher of three sections of Freshman English. Although he teaches nine hours a week, he teaches in that time only three lessons, for each assignment is twice repeated. Moreover, in spite of

occasional changes of textbooks, the body of material with which he deals remains practically the same from year to year—and so do the themes. Since the subjects are drawn largely from the experiences of Freshmen, and since these experiences are neither wide in range nor varied in content, the instructor must expect after the first year or so to read through many themes before he discovers anything new. I once heard a department chairman remark that it is absurd for an instructor of three sections of Freshman English to claim that his theme-reading absorbs his time completely. The chairman missed the point. It is not that the three sections of nothing but Freshman English consume all of the instructor's time, but that the monotony of the work depletes his energy and leaves him incapable of serious intellectual effort. It is hard enough work to criticize adequately thirty Freshman themes on the same subject; it is more than three times as hard to criticize ninety such themes.

From the basic monotony of this work no conscientious instructor can entirely escape, but it is possible for him to secure considerable variety even within the narrow limits prescribed. An occasional change of general method and of textbooks will, to begin with, help greatly to give at least the semblance of variety to the work. The various "systems" vigorously advocated from time to time, the "thought course" and all its competitors, have their chief value, I believe, in providing a rearrangement of basic elements which are themselves practically unchangeable. The instructor himself can combat the monotony of his work in various ways. Even though he may have to teach the same assignment to each of three sections, he should adapt each presentation to the class, for classes, like individuals, have personalities. It is perhaps inevitable that in the course of time he will have collected a little fund of tricks to be employed in presenting certain rhetorical facts, but as soon as he descends to a formal set talk for each assignment he is lost. I know an instructor who made the mistake of repeating to the same section the identical speech, jokes and all, which he had given them at a preceding meeting. They kindly refrained from informing him of his error until he was all through. A live instructor will reduce the monotony of his theme-reading by assigning

a wide variety of theme subjects. In fairness to his students and to himself he will never read themes for more than two consecutive hours; and it will be well for him not to read them for even two hours without an intermission of five or ten minutes. Theme *criticism*—not theme *correction*—demands intense concentration; it requires of the critic genuinely constructive work, and such work, properly done, is very fatiguing. By breaking his theme-reading into short periods the instructor will be able to do better work with much less effort.

The principal charge brought against Freshman English is that it is uninspiring. It does not engage the teacher's mind sufficiently nor pay back in intellectual stimulation the efforts expended upon it. To descend from several years of graduate study of the best literature in the world to extensive and intensive reading of what the *Atlantic* Clubber calls the worst literature in the world is like a descent from chess to tiddledywinks. The advertisements of the Harvard Classics assure the public that fifteen minutes a day spent in reading the best in literature will give the reader a liberal education. What can be said of the effect upon the mind of a daily three-hour saturation in the crudely expressed twilight ideas of college Freshmen? The *Atlantic* Clubber errs in calling Freshman themes "the worst literature in the world." They are not literature at all but schoolboy exercises in the same category as schoolboy "translations" in foreign-language courses. Not one Freshman in a thousand has the desire or the ability to produce literature. Even the prose specimens examined in class are not studied as literature but are prostituted to the demands of instruction in the mechanical forms of the whole composition, the paragraph, and the sentence, until the instructor is in danger of examining every piece of prose that he reads for transition devices and parallelism. More serious still is the danger that in the wilderness of Freshman themes he may lose his critical standards and may come to think that a piece of writing which is only relatively good is absolutely so. I have on several occasions seen young instructors, glowing with the pride of accomplishment, foolishly exhibit A++ themes to friends not engaged in theme-reading. The response was invariably chilling. The reason is that the instructor's judg-



ment is a relative and biased one, like that of parents in the amateur artistic performances of their offspring, whereas the judgment of the friends is absolute and unprejudiced.

Protection for the theme-reader which will save him from intellectual paralysis and from loss of critical ability can come from both department and instructor. For a department to give an instructor a heavy program of nothing but Freshman English is for it to commit a crime against him. If it cannot provide him with a teaching section in literature, it should at least permit him to give up one section or one-half section of his work in Freshman English in exchange for a definite amount of graduate or research work. Under either plan he can maintain his contact with real literature without shirking his work in Freshman English or risking a physical breakdown from overdoing. The second of these plans may result in an increase in the departmental budget, but the return in better teaching will be worth the outlay. Another way in which the department can protect the theme-reader is by keeping the work upon a qualitative rather than a quantitative basis. It is easy for a department to get the idea that there is an absolute relation between improvement in writing and amount of writing done, and to require accordingly more composition than the student can write carefully or the instructor criticize conscientiously. In many departments the work in Freshman English can be improved by a reduction of the mere quantity of writing and a compensating insistence upon work of higher quality.

The instructor can protect himself in two general ways: one by providing in extensive reading and considerable writing an antitoxin for the effect upon him of criticizing hundreds of vapid themes, and the other by extracting from his teaching and theme-reading as much intellectual return as the work will yield. If theme-reading tends to lower critical standards, it stands to reason that the evil can be partly counteracted if the critic will read as much excellent prose as he can find time for. The literary interests of most instructors can be depended upon to enforce this prescription, but a great many instructors are in danger of falling into the habit of reading, after the daily stint of theme-correcting is done, little but newspapers, magazines, and recent plays and

novels. It would be well for such teachers to put themselves through a reading course of their own making. The theme-reader can further keep himself alive by continual writing. He should always have in his workbasket some book or article the composition of which engages his vacations and spare hours. Only by this diversion can he retain his ability to write papers which are not mere exemplars of the rules of rhetoric, awful in their chilling correctness but void of life and interest, A++ themes slightly magnified.

From his teaching and theme-reading the live instructor can gather more intellectual nourishment than one might at first suppose. There is, to begin with, logical drill in resolutely and earnestly attempting to present the day's assignment in the best possible manner. Few instructors devote sufficient time to the very important matter of teaching the lesson. Intellectual work of a higher order can be obtained from a really critical class analysis of prose "models." The abuses to which these specimens of the best in English are subjected under the scalpels of Freshman-English instructors are enough to make Professor Minto spin in his grave. Under the new "thought course" system the students are often taught only the content of the specimen, and the class hour is devoted to a discussion of science, religion, and everything under the sun but English. Under the usual cut-and-dried method employed by many lazy instructors the class hour is spent in mechanically picking from the article transition devices, balanced sentences, and other rhetorical flotsam and jetsam in which Freshmen are so enthusiastically interested. If instead of doing all this the instructor would follow Professor Minto and make with his class a thorough rhetorical and stylistic study of the specimen, the intellectual return for both class and teacher would be immeasurably greater. It is not enough to demonstrate that a piece of classic prose embodies the principles studied in the textbook; the class should be shown why it is truly a great piece of literature, and this involves a study of the author and his style.

It may be difficult to see how any intellectual returns can come from the constant reading of what I heard one instructor call "a miscellaneous mass of misinformation." Nevertheless such returns

will come in proportion to the amount of constructive, critical effort expended by the theme-reader. Too many instructors regard themes only as things to be corrected, and they check misspellings and mistakes in punctuation and sentence construction and indulge freely in the question marks and the wavy red lines facetiously referred to by the *Atlantic* Clubber. Such work is insignificant and mechanical and devoid of any real intellectual returns to either teacher or students. The theme-reader should be a critic, not a proofreader; he should regard his themes as things to be improved, and his corrections should be constructive. I do not mean that he should indicate each step which the student should follow in revising his work, but that he should stimulate effort by suggesting ways in which the theme can be fundamentally improved. No theme should be given back to the student which does not carry with it an individual comment on its defects and merits *as a whole*. Such theme-correcting requires on the part of the critic active intellectual effort, whereas the proofreading variety of theme-correcting demands nothing but a little knowledge of rhetoric, a trained eye, and a few drops of red ink. Incidentally, truly critical theme-correcting brings a large reward in better themes, for a class is very quick to reflect in its own endeavors the industry or lack of interest of its teacher.

The invention of a machine for theme-correcting has long been ardently desired by Freshman-English instructors. Alas, there are hundreds of such machines in the lackadaisical, perfunctory, mistake-checking, mechanical teachers who clog the efforts for vital instruction in English composition. Newspapers and magazines sometimes sneer at university teachers of English as an unproductive lot. I sometimes wonder if there would not be less justification for this charge if there were less Freshman English. At any rate, it is certainly the duty of English departments in large universities to protect their younger men from the dulling effects of the theme-mill, and it is the duty of the Freshman-English instructors to protect themselves in every legitimate and honest way.